

A siren's journey: duality and identity in two Caribbean poets

Michela A. Calderaro

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
[...]
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.
(Maya Angelou, "Still I Rise")

In the beginning was the Middle Passage – the longest journey of the “faceless and nameless bands of men and women who did not just survive, but to some extent prevailed”.¹ On that voyage, the task of creating and safekeeping a repository of memories, ancestral traditions, culture and religious beliefs, and of transporting it to the new world, fell on women.

The remembrance of that journey, with its beastly horror, is an ever present element in the writings of most Caribbean

¹ Lorna Goodison, in Michela A. Calderaro, “An Interview with Lorna Goodison”, *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*, 4, 1 (Spring-Summer 2006). Available at: <www.nyu.edu/calabash/vol4no1/003>

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authors who not only “praise the strength and nobility of spirit which enabled Africans to survive it” but also celebrate the way their resilience helped them to become “artists, musicians and storytellers, healers, scientists, spiritual leaders and empire builders”.² Alone, on ships heading towards some unknown destination, locked below deck, in the dark, rocked and hurled by the violence of the waves, slaves from Africa tried to survive, and keep their traditions alive, recounting and memorizing tales and stories from their homeland. Water creatures, fish, whales, marine spirits, accompanied them in this horrific journey, swirling around the ships, entering their dreams, becoming their saviors and their gods.

Water beings have always stirred people’s imagination, both in Africa and Europe, and these creatures merged and gave life to what I like to think of as a *Caribbean mermaid*. Each civilization, each people, in every part of the world, fantasized about water spirits, calling them sirens, mermaids, giving them wings or tails. European medieval churches are adorned with figures of mermaids; the sirens of early Western tradition are said to have had wings, given to them by Demeter in the hope that their songs would help find Persephone; they were also said to be bird-women who accompanied the dead to the Underworld, and then lost their wings when competing with the Muses, Zeus’s daughters, for the best song.

Oannes, the wise god of the Babylonians, was said to be part man part fish, and indeed according to Greek mythology water creatures with fish tails were only *men*. Whether men or women, at a certain moment in history mermaids lost their wings and acquired a tail, or even two

² Goodison in Calderaro, “An Interview with Lorna Goodison”.

tails, as the legend of Melusine recounts.³ Images of fish-tailed beings were then brought to Africa and there probably merged with folktales and legends of local water-spirits, and the legend of the water Goddess⁴ and the snake-woman, creating yet a new myth. Later, slaves carried with them these beliefs, and depending on the places where they were captured and places they were delivered to, further modified the competences and attributes of these creatures, giving life to new mythological figures.

For Yoruba and Bini people from Nigeria there was Oshun, the spirit of the river, and Yemoja (“mother of fish”), salt-water divinity, both associated with wealth and fecundity. For the Fon people to the west, in what is now Benin, water spirits resided in the Oueme River and its lakes, one of which, Lake Azili, may be the source of the name for the Haitian divinities known as Ezili.⁵

All these water spirits then converged to give us the *Caribbean mermaid*, the rivermumma we so often find in the works of Caribbean writers, mainly women writers: a siren who cannot be thought of, or studied, without keeping in

³ According to the legend, Melusine agrees to marry a man only on condition that he would grant her a day a week for herself. The man agrees and they live happily for many years, then one day the man, mad with jealousy, decides to break his promise and, bursting into Melusine's room, he discovers that his wife has taken the form of a two-tails water creature. Furious for this lack of trust, Melusine disappears, never to return again.

⁴ Sabine Jell-Bahlsen, *The Water Goddess in Igbo Cosmology*, Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 2008.

⁵ Marilyn Houlberg, “Sirens and Snakes: Water Spirits in the Arts of Haitian Vodou”, *African Arts*, 29, 2, Special Issue: Arts of Vodou (Spring 1996), p. 32.

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mind the primal voyage, the Middle Passage, a siren that still today accompanies these poets along their own creative journeys.

Sirens, half-women half-fish, come to represent the Caribbean people in their constant search for a place to call home, raising questions about belonging and making choices. They at times appear as mythological and benevolent creatures, at others as terrifying monsters, ready to shred you to pieces. The siren's journey from sea to land and back, always exiled, always torn between duty and desire along a metaphorical trail, is now reinterpreted and turned into poetry. There is a perfect match between the mermaid's journey through the ocean and back, her frantic search for 'self' and a home, and the emotional and creative journey of Caribbean women writers.

At the time of the slave trade, women transported memories across the ocean, collected tales and beliefs, and immortalized them by switching from oral to written tradition. But how? Slaves were forbidden to speak their dialect, the trip was dangerous, marked from the start by death and violence. The violence of the elements was surpassed perhaps only by the violence inflicted by torturers. Many women, men, children died during the passage, many whose memories were wiped out by unspeakable violence. But how could then the captured outsmart their captors and carry on their own past, their own story? One of the means was the calabash, now a symbol of endurance in the Caribbean.

When taken aboard the slave ships, slaves would put their few belongings in some sort of container, which most often was the big, exsiccated fruit of the calabash tree. The fruits of the calabash tree are very large and, once dried, they can be used as containers for food, or even water, and adorned with inscriptions, drawings, symbols that could not be understood by the slave traders, who thought those symbols

were just some primitive expressions of the black, illiterate slaves. Yet, those inscriptions were in fact narratives, stories, representing the past of a free people. In this way, memories and knowledge have been passed on from generation to generation, under the oblivious eyes of the Master and his thugs. The carved calabash brought from Africa became a means of communication, literally transporting memory from one land to another across the sea; and so the Middle Passage was recorded together with stories of magical beings and ancestral beliefs, on fruits decorated with beautiful mermaids.

The interpretation and the memory of this journey took on different nuances, but in the works of Caribbean women writers they seem almost inextricably linked to the figure of the siren and the use of the calabash as a receptacle of memory. At times the writer's voyage follows the siren's trail, at others it takes on the aspect of a physical trip around an island, at others yet, it becomes a real pilgrimage. However, each journey is basically a return to *those* waters, amid *those* waves, on *those* ships, and represents the attempt to find one's own home, be it above or under water, and the siren, though not always openly mentioned, is still there, dwelling in the imagination of the poet.

Three Kingston born writers, Lorna Goodison,⁶

⁶ Considered one of the most accomplished Caribbean women writers, Lorna Goodison is actually one of the finest artists in contemporary *world* literature, her works defying reductive categorizing. Goodison currently divides her time between Toronto and the United States, where she teaches. She began her artistic career as a painter, still paints most of the covers for her books and actually some of her first paintings were of mermaids (personal conversation with Goodison). Goodison has published eleven collections of poems, two collections of short stories, a novel, and has just published a new and revised collection of her

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Jacqueline Bishop⁷ and Shara McCallum,⁸ best represent the depiction of the siren as embodiment of the same duality Caribbean people experienced: taken away from home, brought to foreign and hostile islands, they had to adjust and change, while trying to preserve memory and language for posterity and trying to understand where they belonged, the Old or the New World, above or below the sea.⁹

Our foreparents carved on
(lest they forget) maps, totems
symbols and secret names,

short stories. She has received numberless awards, including the Musgrave Gold Medal and the Henry Russel Award.

⁷ Jacqueline Bishop is the founding editor of *Calabash: A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters*. Now living in New York, she spent her early years in Jamaica surrounded by a coterie of grandparents, great-grandparents, aunts and uncles – who would return, in fictionalized form, together with the fauna and flora of the island, in her writing. The recipient of many awards, she was also granted scholarships from the Oral History Association, which allowed her to develop her project of giving a print form to oral histories of Jamaican women living in New York City. Published in 2006 as *My Mother Who Is Me: Life Stories from Jamaican Women in New York*, the book marked Bishop's debut as an essayist. In 2006 she published her first collection of poems, *Fauna*, followed in 2007 by a novel and in 2009 by another collection of poems.

⁸ Shara McCallum, born to Afro-Jamaican and Venezuelan parents, is the Director of the Stadler Center for Poetry at Bucknell University. In 1996, still in college, she was awarded the Academy of American Poets Prize. She published four collections of poetry.

⁹ Only Lorna Goodison's and Jacqueline Bishop's works will be discussed here, while Shara McCallum's work is the subject of my upcoming "Alle soglie della Storia: Shara McCallum".

creating art when some
would claim we existed
in beast state.

[...]

So they'd drink water from
grace vessels, their lips
kissing lines of maps

leading back to Africa,
to villages where relatives
waited for years
[...]¹⁰

It is through the creative process that the calabash, used to preserve history, becomes one with the poet, both being receptacles/bearers of memory. In the end, the Story, written in blood and carved on the flesh, is brought in front of us by the bodies of “old women” turned into human calabashes, their flesh inscribed with scriptures and words, carved with old “cures” and old stories, transformed into a legacy for generations to come:

¹⁰ Lorna Goodison, “Passing the Grace Vessels of Calabash”, in *Controlling the Silver*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005, p. 14. This Caribbean “grace vessel” echoes another vessel, also a receptacle of truth, also telling its story to future generations. Like John Keats’s Grecian urn, this vessel too, communicates far beyond what can be perceived by the senses, but this work of African art is not “a silent form” teasing “us out of thought”. It does not offer an out of time story to be discerned by the poet, nor is it a mere art object. Rather, it reports the untold history of Afro-Caribbean slavery, giving voice to the voiceless and telling a story that is painfully current.

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Where I come from,
old women bind living words
across their flat chests,
inscribe them on their foreheads,
and in the palms of the hands.
[...]
Under their clothes
on white calico belly bands,
they have transcribed ancient texts
which soak into their stretched loins;
and when they seek cures for you,
their whitlow fingers Braille-read
medicine words
from the base of their bellies.¹¹

Art becomes the means to remember, to pass on a legacy,
it becomes an unwavering commitment:

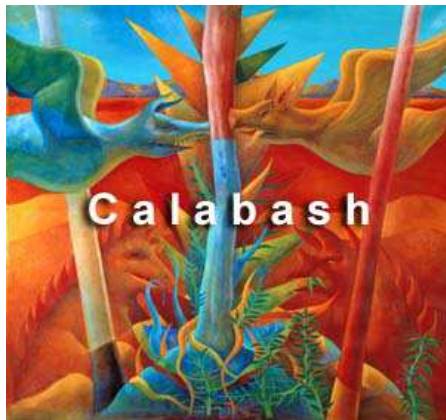
She was the first nameless woman who created
images of her children sold away from her.
[...]
She carved them of heartwood, teeth and nails
her first tools, later she wielded a blunt blade.
[...] She learned her art by breaking
hard rockstones. She did not sign her work.¹²

The necessity to remember, to create art, to record “maps,
totems / symbols and secret names” and to give voice to the
under-represented, is also at base of the founding of

¹¹ Lorna Goodison, “Where I Come From”, in *Goldengrove. New and Selected Poems*, Manchester: Carcanet, 2006, p. 13.

¹² Lorna Goodison, “So Who Was the Mother of Jamaican Art?”, in *Controlling the Silver*, p. 15.

*Calabash. A Journal of Caribbean Arts and Letters.*¹³ The cover art for the inauguration issue, by Tony Monsanto, a Curaçao born artist, displays and celebrates the calabash tree.



Cover of the Journal Calabash

In the same issue Jacqueline Bishop, founding editor of the journal, welcomes the readers with a leaf-shaped poem, whose title cannot but be “Calabash”. The poem appears on both the introductory page and the back cover, encompassing the contents of the volume. The reason

behind the choice of the cover art, the title of the journal, and of course the poem, is that the journal was to be for Caribbean arts, both visual and written, what the calabash had been for African slaves, the means of communicating across countries and oceans; a container of meaning to be shared and passed on to the future. The poem, with some little changes, was later included in Bishop’s debut collection *Fauna*,¹⁴ where the fauna and flora of Jamaica become the means for the poet to communicate, to share her own experience and bring forth the memory of her ancestors. Flowers, plants, trees are given a voice, morph before our eyes and become living creatures who share pain, sorrow, or

¹³ The first issue of the journal was published in September 2000, thanks to the Graduate Program in Creative Writing, New York University. It is now an on-line publication.

¹⁴ Jacqueline Bishop, *Fauna*, Leeds: Peepal Tree Press, 2006.

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show indifference or contempt at people's stupidity ("Allamanda"), and become then one single identity, blending with the women of the island ("Island Juice Blend"). In Bishop's collection the mermaid who accompanied the slaves' passage from Africa to the Caribbean, who is both fish and woman, who can transmute from one to the other, forever torn between two worlds, becomes the very emblem of exile.

Bishop, herself a daughter of multicultural families, black Africans and Europeans, herself divided between worlds, blends flowers and women, birds and women, fish and women, to give us the true essence of Jamaica, an island whose double nature is an enriching quality – an island that can be described as a Garden of Eden, but one where beauty and horror reign together, where haunting and relentless violence is what women experience on their skin, against a background of breathless beauty. The first line of W. B. Yeats's "The Second Coming", chosen as epigraph – "Turning and turning in the widening gyre" – gives Bishop's *Fauna* a distinctive form and structure.¹⁵ We are forever reminded that history is made of cycles and recurring events, that we are bound, just like the siren, to look back in yearning for the place we came from. Accordingly, the journey of Bishop's mermaid begins with an introductory poem, dedicated to Lot's nameless wife:

Some say it was for vanity,
others that it was for greed –
this woman who ended up

¹⁵ As I pointed out in my review of *Fauna*, Yeats's following verse, "The falcon cannot hear the falconer", which is not quoted here, will certainly ring in the reader's memory with all that it says about being held away from home. Michela A. Calderaro, "Jacqueline Bishop, *Fauna*", *Wasafiri*, 24, 1 (March 2009), p. 91.

a great corroding consuming
body of salt, this woman, who,
like me, is always looking back.¹⁶

In both her poems and her fiction, Bishop mixes her own memories with those of other women from the Caribbean. Their stories bring to the fore the violence and the abuse they suffered, first at the hands of slave traders and masters, then at those of their own fathers, grandfathers and uncles. The violence suffered by women is mirrored in the devastation brought to the island by the conquerors; the island itself is wounded and morphs into a woman, at first a victim, raped by the invaders, then a vengeful mother, a creature whose violence is merciless:

Mother's teeth
have sharpened into reefs
against those who would enter
and deflowered her gardens.
As did marauders, who
buccaneered her fertile brown body,
razed the landscape.
Mother tallied the injustices,
cracked into an earthquake –
the year was 1692.¹⁷

Bishop shows us mother-islands like Xaymaca, but also mother-flowers-poets, at whose touch poems would bloom ("Full Bloom", dedicated to Lorna Goodison), and mother-mermaids trying to take their daughters back where they belong:

¹⁶ Jacqueline Bishop, "Lot's Wife", in *Fauna*, p. 10.

¹⁷ Jacqueline Bishop, "Xaymaca", in *Fauna*, p. 10.

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She stepped from behind
a tree,
small dark woman,
chain of teeth around her neck,
locked hair, webbed hands and feet.
She called me to the river's edge,
"Come dance with your water self", she said,
standing in white mist near blue falls.
[...]
(It was said I was lost for two weeks in the bushes.)
[...]
They found us
entwined, covered in green leaves
at the bottom of the river
and pulled us apart.
[...]
As for me
I do not walk by bushes
without hearing a woman's voice singing,
pass a body of water and not see
a familiar shape
small and dark
calling me back home.¹⁸

Once again mermaids come to represent the exiled women from the Caribbean in their endless quest for identity. Bishop's mermaid is both muse and mother, bearer of a duality the poet herself experiences. Perhaps more than in other writers, Bishop's mermaid, a symbol of both the poetic muse and the torment of exile, brings forth the question of belonging.

The whirling gyres which open the collection, and set the journey in motion, also close it, in a slow circling of black crows ("Myth"). After morphing into the Jamaican flowers

¹⁸ Jacqueline Bishop, "Calling Me Back Home", in *Fauna*, p. 63.

and birds of the lost garden, Jacqueline Bishop flies to another world, to the country of her chosen exile, New York, closing “in conversation with the revising poem” (“Leaving the Noise of the World Behind”) the journey that had begun in a “circle of myth and memory” (“An End, or Maybe a Beginning”). The siren’s journey continues in *The River’s Song*, Bishop’s semi-autobiographical novel, where her destiny is mirrored in Gloria’s (the heroine’s) own. This mermaid is both the “dreadful rivermumma” trying to entice little girls to “comb her long green hair and sing with her at night, luring other girls to their deaths”,¹⁹ and Gloria’s double. Both are dominated by opposing passions and desires, knowing all too well that whatever road they take, they will long for the other. The dual nature of the mermaid becomes then central, standing for all that is hidden and uncertain, both familiar and frightening, comely yet horrific, representing Gloria’s own doubts, as she stands at the crossroads of her future life, becoming the emblem of exile.

Also Lorna Goodison’s journey takes us across land and sea and to complete a full circle, “back to where our people come from”. We travel through history and memory, and each poem, in each collection, tells both a personal and a collective story, and themes such as motherhood, Jamaican landscape, Jamaican mythology, family and ancestry, all come together to represent the immense mosaic that is the Caribbean. The voyage Goodison has set as the center of her work, the voyage of ancestors away from freedom and into slavery, comes to symbolize many other voyages, as it also becomes our voyage towards awareness and through the collective artistic memory of humankind.

¹⁹ Jacqueline Bishop, *The River’s Song*, Leeds: Peepal Tree Press 2007, p. 42.

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“Recalling the Fourteen Hour Drive from Kingston to Lucea, 1953”²⁰ is a mental return of the present traveler to a past journey, a pilgrimage with “fourteen pit stops” – unavoidably bringing to mind the fourteen Stations of the Cross and the passion, not only of an individual but of a whole enslaved people, uprooted and transported across the Ocean.

The memory of the middle passage and the uprooting and dispossession of a whole people will be with me until I die. I know that, there is no way of forgetting something like that. I believe that the remembering of it is part of the equipment I have been given as a writer. I wrote a poem like “So Who Was the Mother of Jamaican Art” because I see part of my charge as a writer as laying claim to the humanity of my ancestors, valorising ‘Quashie’ and putting a face and giving names to the faceless and nameless bands of men and women who did not just survive, but to some extent prevailed. I guess the chiaroscuro technique is applicable here too for while I must attempt to write about the unspeakable horrors of the middle passage and the Atlantic Slave trade, I must also praise the strength and nobility of spirit which enabled Africans to survive it, not just survive it as brute beasts, but as artists, musicians and storytellers, healers, scientists, spiritual leaders and empire builders; that is what I do, I celebrate the fact that the so called ‘master’ culture was not able to completely annihilate the culture of the Native Indians and enslaved Africans. I also celebrate the thinking that has gained greater currency in recent years: that several cultures encountered each other, a great struggle took place and something new was created as a result. I much prefer that to the victor and the vanquished version that I grew up with.²¹

²⁰ Included in Lorna Goodison, *Controlling the Silver*.

²¹ Goodison, in Calderaro, “An Interview with Lorna Goodison”.

The idea of pilgrimage is conveyed by many biblical references, rendered through either a Rastafarian interpretation (“In those Bible stories our mothers read to us / John the Baptist was dread righteous Rastaman”, “Jah the Baptist”) or through characters whose tongues merge to give life to a new language: “The Arab came following the long spice route / to this island of Allspice. Shalom and Salaam / becomes ‘Sallo’ on the tongues of the Africans”.²² Caribbean writers’ preoccupation with language, and the means to preserve history and memory for future generations, is translated into an ongoing conversation that mixes Standard English with Creole, between their own poems and with works of other writers, either their contemporaries or belonging to the past.

Tracing the siren’s journey in Goodison’s body of work, we are bound to encounter many cross-cultural exchanges – some directly connected to her own family history (one of her great grandfathers came from Ireland, and her whole production resonates with references to Irish culture and literature).²³ “Country, Sligoville”, from the collection *Turn Thanks*,²⁴ is a re-visitation of W. B. Yeats’ “The Lake Isle of Innisfree” which, beside being loaded with additional references to Yeats’ works, openly quotes his poem “The Mermaid”.

I arise and go with William Butler Yeats
to country, Sligoville
in the shamrock green hills of St. Catherine.

²² Lorna Goodison, “The Wandering Jew and the Arab Merchant on the Island of Allspice”, in *Controlling the Silver*, p. 12.

²³ Lorna Goodison, *From Harvey River: A Memoir of My Mother and Her Island*, New York: HarperCollins, 2007.

²⁴ Lorna Goodison, *Turn Thanks*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995.

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[...]
Love descended from thickets of stars
to light Yeats' late years with dreaming
alone I record the mermaid's soft keenings.

Goodison's own family history – of great grandfathers, cousins, uncles and aunts interlaced with historical and intertextual cross-references, and memories of past generations – becomes a choral quest to find the deeper roots of a people; to define a national consciousness whose origins lie in both the Caribbean, in Africa, and in Europe; and to build a collective and historical narrative that would encompass personal or national memories. The mermaid, so far portrayed as the emblem of exile, is also the one creature who can bring together the many souls of the Caribbean people: she is both our guide through the maze of their quest, and the very embodiment of the quest itself.

Like Bishop's "dreadful Rivermumma", who can change her skin to become a nurturing mother, also Goodison's mermaid has more than a dual nature. On the one hand she is "River Mumma", who can take little girls "down to the deepest parts of the river" to forever dance "in its restless currents"²⁵; on the other she is both a daughter, washing her mother's old body with love, and the very embodiment of sensuality while she is transmuting from human to aquatic form.

I dream that I am washing
my mother's body in the night sea
and that she sings slow
and that she still breathes.
[...]

²⁵ Goodison, *From Harvey River*, p. 130.

I hear my dark mother
speaking sea-speak with pilot fish,
showing them how to direct barks
[...]
I pray my mother breaks free
from the fish pots and marine chores
of her residence beneath the sea,
and that she rides a wild white horse.²⁶

You're a nixie now, a mermaid
a green-tinged/fleshed woman/thing
who swims with thrashing movements
and stands upended on the sea floor
breasts full and floating buoyed by the salt
and the space between your arms now always
filled and your sex sealed forever under
mother-of-pearl scale/locks closes finally
on itself like some close-mouthed oyster.²⁷

However, this mutant creature, the silvery mermaid who accompanied an exiled people across the ocean through a bloody passage, defended the land from predatory hands, sang lullabies to her daughters, washed their mothers' body, now reclaims her own space and the right to new choices. The final word rests with Goodison's mermaid who, with an unexpected turn, surprises everybody in the end, and makes her *final* choice, temporary as it might be. Once an alluring temptress, now an old mermaid,

She sits with her back to us, her teased hair
is now bleached platinum. She has affixed

²⁶ Lorna Goodison, "My Mother's Sea Chanty", in *Turn Thanks*, p. 6.

²⁷ Lorna Goodison, "On Becoming a Mermaid", in *Tamarind Season*, Kingston: Institute of Jamaica Press, 1980.

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paillettes of rhinestones and sequins over
her shimmering scaled skin (here we have
a perfect example of how to gild a lily).²⁸

Tired of insistent, demanding humans who polluted her
harbour, tired of fighting wars, now

Mumma no longer wants to be guardian
of our waters. She wants to be Big Mumma,
dancehall queen of the greater Caribbean.

She no longer wants to dispense clean water
to baptize and cleanse (at least not gratis).

[...]

She must expose her fish
torso, rock the dance fans, go on tour overseas,
go clubbing with P. Diddy, experience snow.²⁹

And how can we blame her, we, ungrateful humans who
have always tried to lock her away from her “watery
kingdom”?³⁰

²⁸ Lorna Goodison, “River Mumma”, in *Controlling the Silver*, p. 53.

²⁹ Lorna Goodison, “River Mumma Wants Out”, in *Controlling the Silver*, p. 54.

³⁰ Bishop, *The River’s Song*, p. 42.